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Peer Review
in Social Protection
and Social Inclusion
2015-2016

Social Community Teams against poverty

SHORT REPORT

The Netherlands, 19-20 January 2016

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and social inclusion**

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Held in The Hague (The Netherlands) on 19-20 January 2016, the Peer Review was hosted by the Dutch Ministry of Social Affairs and Employment. In addition to the host country, ten peer countries were represented: Belgium, Czech Republic, Denmark, Finland, Ireland, Latvia, Lithuania, Malta, Poland and Romania. The stakeholder representatives were the European Social Network and the European Anti-Poverty Network. Taking part for the European Commission were representatives of DG Employment, Social Affairs and Inclusion (DG EMPL).

1. The policy under review

Compared with other EU Member States, the Netherlands has relatively low levels of poverty and social exclusion. But in the Netherlands too, poverty is on the increase. Of the country's approximately 7 million households, over 10 % are at risk of poverty. Also, poverty is now affecting broader segments of the population.

The Dutch government's declared aim is to **move from a welfare state to a "participation society"** built on citizens' self-reliance and networking. Since 2013, **extra funding (currently €100m per year)** has been provided by central government for the fight against poverty, social exclusion and debt. **As large parts of the social security system have been devolved to the municipalities**, 90 % of this funding goes to them. Each municipality receives social assistance funding based on an estimate of the expected number of local users. If a municipality overspends this budget, it has to make up the difference. If it underspends, it can keep the rest of the funding for earmarked local purposes.

One reason for shifting these responsibilities to the local level is to promote closeness to the users. But there is also a financial motive. In anticipation of efficiency gains from the transfer, **the budget has on average been reduced by 30 %**.

Municipalities are expected to follow an integrated approach to social services, while offering solutions tailored to each individual case. So local government has had to take on a wide range of costly new responsibilities, but has also received a measure of freedom to shape social services in line with local circumstances.

In response, many municipalities have set up **Social Community Teams (SCTs)**. These generally include a broad range of professionals. They operate jointly at a community level to provide and coordinate services to people who currently need help. Both the public sector and the private sector, such as civil society organisations, may be involved.

There is **no single blueprint for an SCT**. It can be structured in various ways, and may evolve over time. Some Dutch municipalities even work with multiple SCTs, with different focal points responding to local circumstances. An SCT may be located in a specific building or dispersed over various locations – such as schools, shelters, hospitals, sports clubs or parks – where the team members can approach people and be approached. For instance, a civil society organisation, school principal or local policy officer may advise someone to contact an SCT – or an SCT to visit someone. Either way, the aim is to provide a single first entry point for people (one stop shop), so that they do not have to approach various institutions.

Based on responses from 234 of the country's 394 municipalities, a survey in 2015 found that 87 % now have at least one SCT. Some 60-70 % of support requests to these teams are of a financial nature. Specialists in welfare work, social support and disabilities were most often included in SCTs. Also frequently involved were district nurses, mental health services and youth workers, together with specialists in children and families, sheltered living, school social work and debt relief. Public social services continued to play an important role, but their involvement in SCTs declined steeply. While they were present in 54 % of the teams in 2014, this fell to 37 % in 2015.

2. Key issues discussed during the meeting

As the central theme, the Dutch hosts put the question of “how to better equip social community teams to empower people out of poverty and stimulate social inclusion”. But, given the different forms that poverty can take and the varying social security structures across the EU, it was “not expected that this Peer Review will lead to a single golden answer applicable to all”. Rather, the aim was “to reflect with each other on existing or potential integrated approaches against poverty in order to return to our own field with ideas, good practices, helpful experiences, tools and suggestions”.

The hosts also asked that the Peer Review should contribute to the improvement of integrated anti-poverty policies “on a local, national and European level” and that it should stimulate “further knowledge-sharing and implementation”. Anti-poverty action and the exchange of best practices will be priorities during the Dutch EU presidency in the first half of 2016 (*see the last point under “Key Learning Elements” below*).

The Peer Review heard presentations on the Dutch policy and the wider European context, as well as practical examples of SCT work in the municipalities of Leeuwarden and Zaanstad. The peer countries each presented their practices and contexts, and the European stakeholder organisations contributed statements. The discussions highlighted a number of issues in common – notably the current financial constraints, the new emphasis on the labour market activation of social assistance users, and in some cases the difficulty of reconciling locally and individually tailored implementation with national, systematic policy-setting. Also considered was the extent to which social work is in itself a specialised skill, requiring professionally qualified social workers.

3. Key learning elements

- **SCTs can be an economical, effective and sustainable instrument** in the fight against poverty and related problems. Among SCTs’ advantages are **flexibility, potential cost-effectiveness and accessibility via one stop shop**. They have a low hierarchy, which contributes to their flexibility. There is one single entry point. Needs assessments are carried out immediately, without people having to wait. Teams are based in local residential areas, and this facilitates outreach.
- Solutions should be sought in **co-creation with the users**, rather than through a top-down approach.
- **SCTs must be well embedded within the local community**, which means that all relevant stakeholders, especially NGOs, employers and people in poverty, must be involved.
- A **legal framework for SCTs** should provide a **common context** but leave sufficient **leeway to adapt to local situations and needs**.
- A **coherent anti-poverty strategy** should include a definition of poverty that goes beyond income alone. The systematic collection of reliable information is also important. “Indirect” poverty policies often have a deeper impact on combating poverty than “direct” (targeted) policies. A “social impact assessment” can help to avoid perverse or otherwise unexpected outcomes and increase the effectiveness of initiatives.
- **Integrated approach to social work** requires **interdisciplinary teams composed of highly motivated and competent professionals**. Generalist social workers, with a broad perspective and legal competences (front office) could assist in coordinating and developing networks at the local level. The specialist competences of social workers (such as their knowledge of appropriate methods) remain fundamental. A mixed-method approach for social intervention is needed, taking account of the diversity of potential users.

- The **transfer of responsibilities to the local level brings with it two major challenges**: the **lack of resources** to cover liabilities that have been delegated, and the risk that **inequality among different municipalities could lead to unequal treatment** on the basis of residence, and thus to care migration. **Multi-level governance** between the local, intermediate, national and European levels is needed, as are **horizontal cooperation/partnerships** among different actors (public, private for-profit, and NGOs) and different domains (departments).
- The **“active inclusion”** approach is the best model for activation policies. It consists of a combination of adequate income support, inclusive labour markets, and access to quality services. This approach was well reflected in the European Commission’s Recommendation [2008/867/EC](#) of 3 October 2008 on the active inclusion of people excluded from the labour market.
- If social service users are required or encouraged to perform **unpaid work** for “the benefit of society”, this work should contribute to the user’s own development. It should be in meaningful jobs, combined with training. However, there is a risk that unpaid work may reduce the jobs available for low-skilled personnel and/or drive out genuine voluntary work.
- **Empowerment** of users is vital, but the responsibility cannot rest with individuals alone. Empowerment requires awareness-raising, training and new skills development, as well as the resources and advocacy of different professionals and networks. Qualitative instruments could measure improvements in empowerment.
- **Constant coordination of policy and practice** is needed. This requires a significant effort involving politicians, civil servants, private actors, and the local communities. Cooperation with NGOs is important, as they can bring valuable specialist knowledge to bear.
- A **reiteration and strengthening of social rights** is fundamental. They provide the legal framework to fully participate in society.
- Relying on users’ own networks is not a viable option. **“Poor people have poor networks”**.
- People in poverty need both **instrumental support** (jobs, education, housing, income) and **expressive support**, such as emotional support and integration into new networks.
- **Increasing emphasis should be put on evidence** with regard to policy making, service delivery and evaluation in order to identify the most effective and efficient approaches and scale them up. Systematic **evaluations of SCTs** should be carried out, together with comparison over time: have the SCTs succeeded in reaching their objectives, how satisfactory have users found the service, and to what extent were the SCTs able to address the users’ needs?
- Within the **EU**, more than 120 million people are currently at risk of poverty or social exclusion. In line with the principle of subsidiarity, poverty reduction should remain a competence of the Member States. However, the **European Platform against Poverty and Social Exclusion (EPAPSE)** should be reformed and reinvigorated. The implementation of policy-relevant EU policy documents should be monitored (such as the Active Inclusion Recommendation, the Recommendation on Investing in Children and the Social Investment Package). The **Pillar of Social Rights** currently under development in the EU should include provisions relevant to fighting poverty and promoting social participation.

- The **European Commission** is issuing **calls for projects aimed at fostering policy innovation in the delivery of integrated services**. It has also issued a **call for tender for a major study of at least 10 countries**, to assess reforms aimed at integrating the delivery of social services for minimum income recipients. This will assist in the preparation of **reform pathways** for Member States. The results of the study should be ready towards the end of 2017. A Commission-proposed **Recommendation for bringing the long-term unemployed into the labour market** was adopted on 7 December 2015 by the EPSCO Council, which brings together ministers responsible for employment, social affairs, health and consumer policy from all EU Member States. This recommendation also promotes an integrated approach and a single point of contact with unemployed people – a **one-stop shop**.
- The **Dutch EU presidency** during the first half of 2016 will provide a number of opportunities to address poverty issues. The fight against poverty will be among main priorities during this presidency. It is intended to stimulate the **exchange of good practices on poverty reduction**, and continue to involve public bodies and civil society organisations in this effort. The Netherlands will host the annual conference of the European Social Network in 2016. The Dutch presidency will be also seeking European Council conclusions on an integrated approach. These Council conclusions will be prepared in the Social Protection Committee. The aim will be to have them adopted in June 2016 by the EPSCO Council.

4. Contribution of the Peer Review to Europe 2020 and the Social Investment Package

Under its Europe 2020 strategy, the EU set targets for **sustainable and inclusive growth**. One aim was to **lift at least 20 million people out of poverty and raise working-age employment levels to 75 %**. Halfway through the time period for the implementation of the strategy, the Peer Review heard from Commission representatives that **Europe is actually drifting away from these targets**. Four million more people in the EU now face poverty and social exclusion than at the outset of the strategy. Child poverty and severe material deprivation have shown particularly sharp increases.

Active inclusion is an important means of reversing this trend. The **Social Investment Package** and other Commission initiatives of recent years have constantly emphasised the importance of actively including people who are currently excluded from the labour market and society. The three pillars of active inclusion are **active labour market policies, adequate minimum incomes and access to quality services**. The Dutch policy under review takes account of these three mutually reinforcing pillars. More particularly, the SCTs are a good practical example of access to quality social services. All the evidence suggests that, if services are delivered in **an integrated way**, their efficiency and cost-effectiveness are improved. They are a good long-term investment in social well-being, growth and employment.

The Peer Review showed that delivering services in partnership, to people with various needs in the fields of health, education, housing, care, finance and employment, enables individualised approaches and improved outcomes.

